

Lost in Translation: Learning Disabilities and the LatinX Education Gap

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ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the educational challenges and support systems for LatinX students with learning disabilities and to propose legislative policies to address these issues. Despite federal protections such as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504, LatinX students with learning disabilities (LDs) remain undiagnosed, misidentified, and underserved due to cultural stigma, linguistic bias, and inadequate educator training. By applying theories of Critical Race Theory, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, this research will analyze how intersecting factors such as race, language, socioeconomic status, and disability affect the educational experiences of LatinX students with LDs. This thesis will also review existing literature and identify disparities in diagnosis/identification, placement, and discipline. Drawing from personal experience and academic research, this thesis will propose culturally responsive educator training and increased funding for inclusive resources as legislative strategies to help promote equity in educational settings.

PERSONAL INTEREST

My interest in learning disabilities began when my younger brother started to display symptoms of Dyslexia. The day my family took my brother to get diagnosed started my journey into the world of learning disabilities among Latinos in the U.S. Growing up in a Latino household, I became acutely aware of stigmas and lack of understanding and support for individuals similar to my brother. Before my brother, I was completely out of the know regarding learning disabilities or any type of disabilities, especially among Latinos. It was not until after my brother that I learned I had dyscalculia, which is a learning disability that affects my ability to understand and mentally work with numbers, which made math my favorite subject in school. I severely struggled with math throughout Elementary and Middle School and only seemed to frustrate my parents and teachers with my inability to do basic math in my head. This led me to become ashamed of my inability to do basic math like my peers and internalize the belief that I was not an intelligent person. Fortunately, one of my high school math teachers helped me recognize and overcome my learning disability. As time went on, I started to meet other Latino individuals who also had learning disabilities throughout high school and in college. These individuals have all shared similar stories and experiences. This further intensified my interest in learning more about this topic.

As I delved deeper into this topic, I was shocked to discover the disparities that exist. Latinos in the U.S. are disproportionately affected by learning

disabilities, and there are numerous systemic barriers that hinder their access to early intervention and appropriate resources. In the Latino community, there is often a sense of shame and lack of acceptance surrounding learning disabilities and little support to these individuals.

INTRODUCTION

Across the United States, LatinX students with learning disabilities (LDs) are often misdiagnosed, underdiagnosed, or entirely overlooked in educational systems that fail to account for cultural and linguistic differences. Despite federal policies aimed at equity in special education, barriers such as language proficiency, implicit bias, lack of teacher training, and systemic racism continue to create educational gaps for these students.

Learning disabilities (LDs) are neurodevelopmental disorders that can affect a person's ability to learn and process information and/or in the same way as their peers. They affect how students process information, often interfering with reading, writing, math, speaking, listening, and reasoning. Learning disabilities are not caused by a lack of intelligence or motivation. In fact, people with learning disabilities can be very intelligent and motivated. However, their brains may process information differently, which can make it difficult for them to learn in traditional ways. When appropriately supported, students with LDs can thrive. However, for LatinX students, many of who are bilingual, are from low-income households, or are navigating cultural and systemic bias — their learning disabilities are frequently misunderstood, misdiagnosed, or completely ignored.

Some common learning disabilities includes Dyslexia which is a language-based learning disability that affects reading, writing, and comprehension; Dysgraphia which is a learning disability that affects writing

ability and fine motor skills; and Dyscalculia which is a learning disability that affects a person's ability to understand numbers and learn math facts. Auditory processing disorder (APD) is a disorder where individuals have difficulty understanding spoken language, even when hearing is normal. Language processing disorder (LPD) is a disorder where individuals have difficulty understanding or using language, both spoken and written. A very common LD is Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) which is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity.

For students, the presence of an LD can significantly hinder academic achievement, social integration, and future success. Understanding and addressing LDs has become a critical focus within educational systems worldwide. The ways in which LDs are identified are deeply shaped by social and institutional forces. Teachers, schools, and policymakers often lack the cultural knowledge or resources needed to recognize learning challenges in Latinx students without combining them with language acquisition or behavioral differences. These oversights have led to serious consequences such as academic underachievement, stigmatization, and even school drop out.

What is LatinX?

The term "LatinX" is used to refer to individuals who are of Latin American descent. This term is used to include individuals of all gender identities, including non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals, and is an inclusive

substitute for the traditional gendered terms "Latino" and "Latina". While still debated in its usage, across the community the term is increasingly adopted in academic, policy, and advocacy spaces for its inclusivity.

LatinX students with learning disabilities (LDs) a unique combination of systemic barriers that hinder their academic success and overall well-being. These barriers include language barriers, cultural misconceptions, limited access to appropriate resources, and a general lack of culturally responsive support in schools. As a result, this can exacerbate the effects of LDs, leaving many LatinX students without the accommodations and support they need to thrive academically and socially.

Additionally, current educational policies and practices fail to adequately address the unique educational needs of LatinX students with LDs. Due to these unmet needs, the LatinX population faces increased risks of academic underachievement, social exclusion, and long-term economic disadvantages. Research indicates that LatinX students are frequently underdiagnosed or misdiagnosed leading to a lack of appropriate and timely intervention and support. Without accurate identification and appropriate accommodations, these individuals struggle in meeting academic standards, which results in lower academic achievement, low self esteem, and long term educational setbacks. They may find it difficult to keep up with their peers if they do not receive sufficient support. Struggling academically without a clear understanding of the underlying reason can negatively affect their self-esteem. LatinX students with learning disabilities

can feel inadequate, frustrated, and like failures. The combined effects of undiagnosed and untreated learning disabilities among LatinX students can result in higher dropout rates. These challenges are further compounded by socioeconomic factors, linguistic bias, and cultural misunderstandings within the educational system that creates a cycle of marginalization for LatinX students with learning disabilities.

The Objective

The primary objective of this research is to explore the educational challenges and support for LatinX students with learning disabilities and propose legislative solutions aimed at enhancing educational equity for this population. This paper seeks to:

- Assess the effectiveness of current interventions and support services;
- Examine the role of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic factors in shaping their educational experiences;
- Offer policy recommendations aimed at improving educational outcomes for LatinX students with LDs.

This research is significant for several reasons. It will contribute to the limited amount of knowledge on learning disabilities within the LatinX community. While educational disparities affecting students with learning disabilities are well documented, there is a lack of research that focuses specifically on the intersection of disability and Latinx identity. The existing

literature acknowledges the educational disparities facing students with learning disabilities but few provide actionable, culturally responsive solutions for this growing demographic. Although awareness of these education equities is increasing, very little systemic change has been made. This thesis will promote educational equity and inclusion by ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed regardless of their background or learning challenges. The proposed legislative policy ideas in this paper will inspire others to step up to advocate for better practices and support systems for LatinX students with learning disabilities. By promoting inclusion and providing legislative recommendations, this paper has the potential to create a lasting social impact, fostering an educational system that supports the unique needs of LatinX students with learning disabilities.

BACKGROUND HISTORY

The Evolution of Learning Disabilities in Education

Learning disabilities is a concept that has evolved over the years 100 years (Scheiman and Rouse 2006). Learning disabilities (LDs) within educational systems began to be recognized during the mid-20th century as psychologists and educators started to understand the unique neurological barriers some students face in traditional learning environments. LDs were originally misunderstood or commonly viewed as a low level of intelligence rather than specific challenges in processing information.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

A major change occurred during the 1970s when laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed and helped ensure that individuals with disabilities, including those with LDs, had access to the proper assistance in public schools. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), is a law that provides free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services such as early intervention services for infants, toddlers (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

What is Section 504?

Another foundational law is Section 504. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act was the first major U.S. law that addressed discrimination against individuals with disabilities. The act prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in federally-assisted programs or activities (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development). According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the act specifically states, “No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States. . .shall, solely by reason of her or his disability, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program, service or activity receiving federal financial assistance or under any program or activity conducted by any Executive agency or by the United States Postal Service”.

In other words, its purpose is to ensure that people with disabilities are not excluded from participating in programs or activities that receive federal funding. This law applies to public schools, requiring them to provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities to ensure they have an equal opportunity to participate in academic and extracurricular activities. This includes but is not limited to extra time on tests, preferential seating, and/or usage of assistive technology. 504 Plans are specific to Section 504. A 504 plan is not as detailed as an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), but is developed to outline the specific accommodations a student needs. This plan is specifically for students

who do not qualify for special education services under IDEA but still require accommodations in order to succeed academically in their school.

Policy Gaps and the Need for Reform

Despite the progress made through IDEA and similar policies, significant gaps still remain in effectively addressing the needs of LatinX students with learning disabilities. The existing policies frequently overlook the intersectionality of language, culture, and disability that affect LatinX students. While IDEA mandates specialized support for students with disabilities, it does not specifically require accommodations that address linguistic and cultural barriers that are critical to the academic success of LatinX students

Furthermore, inequities continue to persist since there are neither federal mandates nor state guidelines that address the needs of minority students with Learning Disabilities. Due to an overreliance on English-based interventions and traditional diagnostic techniques, LatinX students continue to be at a higher risk of misidentification, being placed in restrictive educational settings, or receiving inadequate and culturally insensitive support. Not only does this hinder their academic progress but this also contributes to long term educational disparities.

Current Context and Significance

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the need for more inclusive policies and practices in education, especially for minority students with learning disabilities. The current political landscape — in the light of the 2024

election, has raised concerns. Currently the 47th U.S President, Donald J. Trump has proposed on numerous occasions the dismantling of the U.S. Department of Education, advocating for a return of educational authority to the states. This has raised a high amount of concern among educators and advocates, as this threatens to increase inconsistent funding and policies for students with learning disabilities, and student protections.

These changes are especially harmful for students with learning disabilities from low - income and communities of color, including LatinX students. These changes can make already-existing disparities worse. This is why it is important to address the barriers LatinX students encounter within an inclusive and equitable framework.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, I will outline the theoretical framework that guides my thesis project. These theories provide me a lens that I will use in order to understand the experiences of LatinX students with learning disabilities, especially how things like culture, language, and disability overlap. In this section I will break down the main ideas from each theory, show how they are connected to my thesis, and explain why they matter for the topic I'm studying.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical race theory (CRT) is a framework based on the idea that race is not a natural, biologically based feature of physically distinct subgroups of humans, but rather socially constructed tool that is used to oppress and exploit people of color (Britannica, 2024). CRT challenges the dominant ideologies on race and meritocracy by exposing how racism is deeply embedded within not only the legal system but also educational systems.

In this thesis, Critical Race Theory will provide me a lens to examine the way how structural injustices and systemic racism shape the educational experience of LatinX students with learning disabilities. This theory focuses on how institutional and historical biases affect teacher expectations, resource allocation, and educational access, which can all influence the experience and educational outcomes of LatinX students with LDs. By acknowledging the intersection of race, ability, and language, CRT will help shed light on how

policies and practice within education may unintentionally perpetuate exclusion and inequity. Using CRT, I will be aiming to enhance the voices and experience of LatinX students who oftentimes are overlooked in both disability and conversations about educational equity.

Cultural Capital Theory

Cultural Capital Theory (CCT) is a framework that explains the way humans perceive themselves and others based on their cultural knowledge, behaviors, and social assets (Reed & Johnson, 2023). The theory argues that people can acquire certain forms of cultural capital (such as language proficiency and education), and those who are successful improve their social status (Reed & Johnson, 2023). Individuals who possess these dominant forms of capital are much more likely to succeed and advance in society.

In the context of education, Pierre Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory provides me a framework for understanding how LatinX students are disadvantaged in the educational system. According to this theory, schools often depend on and value the cultural capital of middle class white families with specific linguistic skills and behaviors which does not align with the cultural knowledge, language practices, and familial norms of LatinX families. Schools often prioritize and reward the cultural capital of the middle class and while families such as their abilities, background, and academic behaviors. This results in LatinX student's cultural strengths being overlooked or undervalued which can

affect their academic achievement. By applying Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory, it will help me shed light on how educational practices may perpetuate social inequality by not recognizing the diverse cultural assets that LatinX students provide to the classroom.

Socio-Cultural Theory and Latino Students

Psychologist Lev Vygotsky developed a theory regarding the ways in which our social interactions impact our cognitive growth. This is known as Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development. The theory states that a child's learning improves when they are supported by another individual such as a parent or teacher (Gowrie NewSouthWales, 2023). Children pick up on the attitudes and beliefs they see from others around them, which in turn shape how they think and learn. Due to this Vygotsky believed that culture plays a big role in shaping cognitive development (Gowrie NewSouthWales, 2023).

A key concept within this theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is used to explain why guiding an individual through a task instead of simply asking them to complete it can enhance their cognitive development and ability (Gowrie NewSouthWales, 2023). In other words, when an individual is asked to complete a task that is above their skill or ability level, the ZPD reflects the individual's ability to do the task with the help and guidance of a more knowledgeable person (Gowrie NewSouthWales, 2023). When learners are supported within this zone, their cognitive development significantly improves.

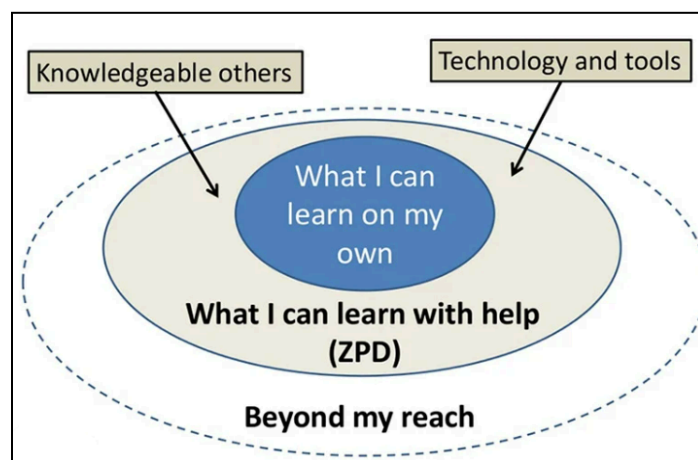


Figure 1, *Zone of Proximal Development Diagram*

Note. Visual representation of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), illustrating the difference between what an individual can do independently and with guidance. From *Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development*, by Saul McLeod (2025), <https://www.simplypsychology.org/vygotsky.html>

When applying this theory to LatinX students with LDs, it highlights how important language and cultural factors are in shaping educational outcomes. Language barriers and bilingualism can make it more difficult to diagnose and treat learning disabilities. For example, tests for LDs are typically designed for students who are fluent in English. So if a student who is bilingual or isn't fluent in English takes the test, the results might not fairly represent their skills, leading to misdiagnosis or lack of proper support. Additionally, how learning disabilities are viewed and dealt with in Latino families and communities is influenced by cultural norms and values. One of the biggest aspects of LatinX culture is family. This can be used to improve educational practices within the ZPD by using the strengths of the culture. Educators can improve learning within the ZPD by actively involving the families in the learning process. This theory highlights the need for more culturally responsive teaching and assessments that also

acknowledge the involvement of family and language in the cognitive development of LatinX students with LDs. 2

Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and LatinX Students

Urie Bronfenbrenner developed a theory that human development is influenced by different types of environmental systems. This theory provides an understanding of the multifaceted influences on LatinX students with learning disabilities.

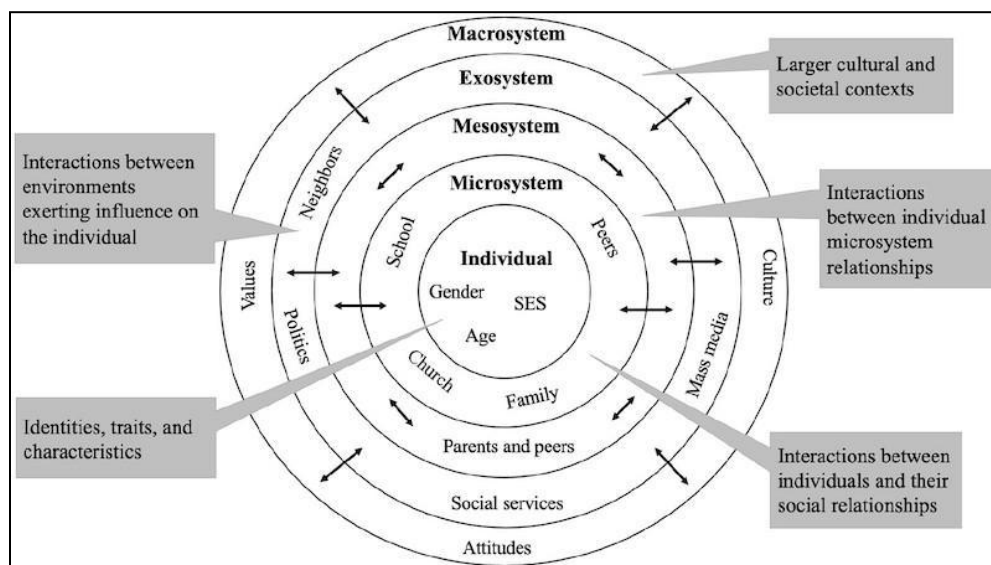


Figure 2, *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model diagram*

Note. Visual representation of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, illustrating the interconnected systems that influence human development. From *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model*, by P. Main (2023)

At the center of the diagram is the microsystem, which includes immediate surroundings such as family, peers, and school (Main, 2023). The mesosystem refers to interactions between immediate settings such as parent-teacher interaction

(Main, 2023). LatinX families who understand and support learning disabilities can positively impact their children's education. Additionally, schools with adequate resources and culturally educated/responsive educators can create a supportive learning environment.

The exosystem includes external environments that indirectly influence the individual such as access to social services or resources through parental employment (Main, 2023). For LatinX students, not having access to healthcare, special education, or after school programs, and may be potentially limited by barriers such as finances or immigration status can harm their educational experience. The macrosystem covers societal and cultural influences such as attitudes towards disabilities and educational and legal policies on the support services available to students with LDs (Main, 2023). This is where attitudes towards disabilities, systemic racism, bias, and inadequate protections can contribute to Latinx students with LDs being overlooked.

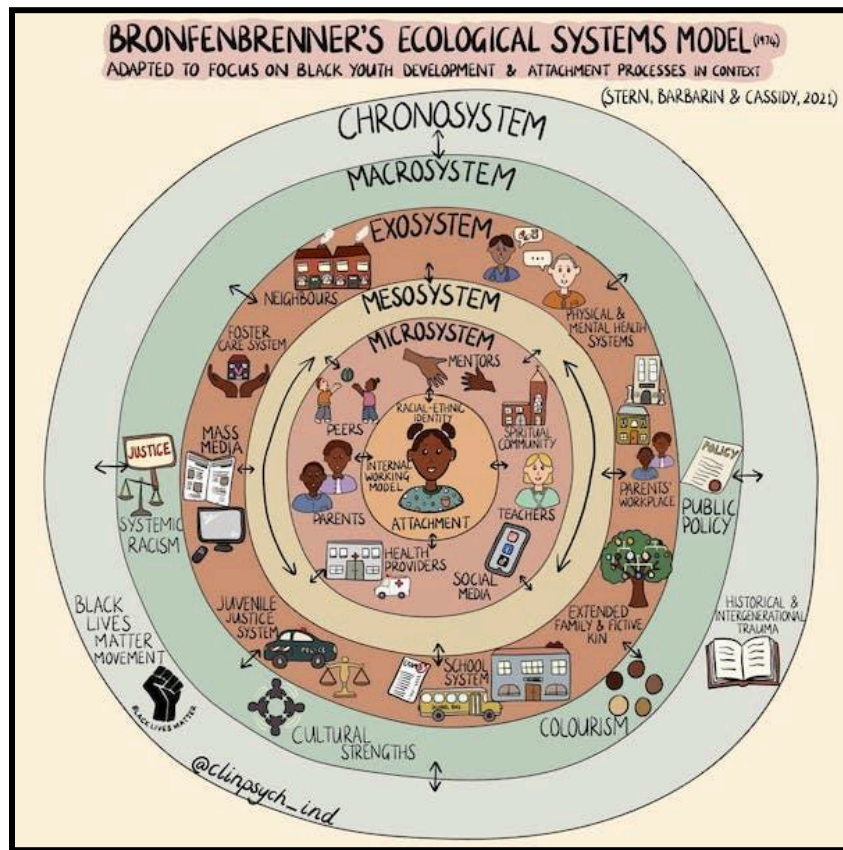


Figure 3, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model diagram

Note. Visual representation of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, including the chronosystem. From *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model*, by P. Main (2023)

The chronosystem considers changes over time such as immigration history and differences in attitudes and support between generations (Main, 2023). In LatinX families, there are generational differences in understanding or addressing learning disabilities which affect how and when students receive support. By applying Bronfenbrenner's theory, this project can recognize how important it is to view LatinX students with LDs not as something independent but as something that is shaped by interrelated systems that requires a culturally responsive approach.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning Disabilities(LDs) in LatinX Communities

Over the past few decades, the LatinX population in the US has grown significantly, making it one of the largest ethnic groups in the nation. The Census indicates that 23% of Oregon's under-18 population is Latino (Goldberg, 2022). In Oregon, Latino or Hispanic students make up about 22% of the student body (Leal Unmuth, 2014). LatinX students make up a sizable portion of the student body in many American schools. Despite this, there is still a large amount of research that explores the particular difficulties that Latino students with learning disabilities encounter. The CDC collected data in 2020 and found that compared to non-LatinX students, LatinX children aged 11–17 had a 14.2% lower diagnosis rate for ADHD or learning disabilities (Zablotsky & M. Alford, 2020). It was more common for non-Latino children to receive an ADHD or other learning disability diagnosis.

Addressing disparities in education is essential, especially in light of the notable gaps among LatinX students, which are made more difficult for those who struggle with learning disabilities. These disparities are caused by a number of factors, including cultural differences in the understanding and recognition of learning disabilities, limited access to high-quality educational resources, and language barriers. Comprehending these obstacles is crucial in helping to alleviate the suffering of LatinX students with learning disabilities.

There is a growing body of research illustrating that LatinX students with learning disabilities are disproportionately affected by systemic inequities in special education diagnosis and support. While I was not surprised about the misdiagnosis of LDs, I was surprised to learn that there is both overrepresentation and underrepresentation of LatinX students in special education programs for LDs. To some extent, my assumption was supported by research indicating that Latinx students are more likely to be underdiagnosed in schools that predominantly serve students of color. Conversely, they are more likely to be overdiagnosed with learning disabilities in predominantly white school settings.

Guiberson (2009) conducted a review of the representation of Hispanic students in special education and discovered consistent patterns of overrepresentation, underrepresentation, and misidentification (or misdiagnosis). According to Guiberson (2009), overrepresentation occurs when Latino students are disproportionately placed in special education programs compared to their peers (Guiberson, 2009). Underrepresentation occurs when Latino students with disabilities are not identified and therefore do not receive the services they need (Guiberson, 2009). This often happens due to a lack of proper assessment tools and practices that are culturally and linguistically appropriate (Guiberson, 2009). This causes students to not get essential support, which can negatively impact their academic achievement and overall development.

Misidentification (or misdiagnosis) refers to the incorrect identification of the type of learning disability a student has (Guiberson, 2009). This can occur

when an LatinX ESL student is misidentified as having a learning disability when the issue is actually related to language acquisition. A student with a learning disability may also be misidentified as simply having difficulties with learning English, leading to a lack of appropriate interventions. Misidentification can have harmful effects on a student's academic progress due to not being able to get the appropriate support.

These issues are often caused by inadequately trained staff. Many educators lack the necessary training to differentiate between language acquisition issues and learning disabilities. Additionally, insufficient cultural competence leads to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of student behavior and performance. The use of inappropriate assessment tools that do not consider cultural and linguistic differences exacerbates these issues.

This is echoed in the Hechinger Report by Carr (2022), which highlights how Latino and Black students struggling with reading are frequently overlooked for intervention services that are consistently provided to their white peers. According to Carr (2022), schools that serve Black and Latino communities often lack sufficient specialists or staff trained in learning disability interventions. As a result, students who struggle to read due to dyslexia are often left to “sink or swim” due to not receiving effective help. This is further supported by teacher bias, where white educators are more likely to undermine the academic potential of Black and Latino students(Carr, 2022). Additionally, the author also argues that the families are left to bear the burden. “Advocates and parents have argued that

educators are often too quick to blame poor reading outcomes on families, particularly low-income ones, overlooking schools' own complicity in perpetuating unequal access" (Carr, 2022). Together these findings demonstrate how racialized assumptions, educator bias, and unequal access to resources perpetuates a cycle where LatinX students with learning disabilities are misdiagnosed or completely left behind.

Issues of Bilingualism

Bilingualism is a strength for students but one that also presents significant challenges for LatinX students with learning disabilities (LDs). Speaking more than one language can be cognitively beneficial, but can complicate the process of identifying/diagnosing and supporting students with LDs. This is supported in the work by Abedi (2014) who highlights how educators struggle with distinguishing between language acquisition and learning disabilities. This struggle and confusion leads to overrepresentation or underrepresentation of English Language learners (ELLs) in special education programs. ELL students with lower levels of proficiency are more likely to be misidentified as having an LD, due to struggling with academic English rather than cognitive deficits (Abedi, 2014).

According to Abedi (2014), this misidentification is linked to the design and use of standardized assessments which are commonly made for monolingual, English speaking students. The complexity of the assessment tools unfairly penalizes LatinX with learning disabilities as they are expected to fall behind both

ELL and non-ELL students. Abedi (2014) highlights a compelling finding in their article where a study was conducted on a group of 738 students, 117 of them were classified as students with disabilities. Out of the 117 students with disabilities, 68.1% of students classified with disabilities were actually ELLs, whereas only 22.5% were students without disabilities (Abedi, 2014). This disparity illustrates a deeply rooted misclassification issue. Schools and educators are unable to meet the needs of both LatinX students who are learning English and those who do not fit the traditional mold of how students are expected to learn. So rather than receiving the right kind of help, these students often get misdiagnosed, placed in incorrect placements, or simply fall through the cracks. To help address these issues, the author advocates for a linguistic and culturally responsive assessment.

Diagnostic, Placement, & Discipline Disparities

According to a brief by the National Center For Learning Disabilities (2020), the process of identifying students for special education is deeply affected by both race and poverty, leading to disproportionate outcomes for many students of color. For example, students living at or below the federal poverty level are more than twice as likely to be identified with specific learning disabilities (SLD) as students in households with income four times the poverty level (National Center For Learning Disabilities, 2020). Additionally, students who experience four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (such as economic hardship, divorce or separation of a parent, death of a family member, incarcerated parent,

etc.) have been found to be 32 times more likely to be diagnosed with learning disability or behavioral challenge (National Center For Learning Disabilities, 2020). However, even when comparing students of similar income levels, LatinX and Black students are still significantly more likely to be identified for special education compared to their white peers. Misdiagnosis not only leads to inadequate and misplaced support but also long term harm such as lower academic expectations, lower self-esteem, and less access to general education and pathways to postsecondary education.

After a student is diagnosed or identified as having a disability, their placement is an important decision that plays a significant role in their academic career. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students must be taught in the “least restrictive environment” (LRE)(National Center For Learning Disabilities, 2020). This means that students with disabilities need to and should be included in general education and among the rest of their peers whenever possible (National Center For Learning Disabilities, 2020). Research has clearly and consistently supported the benefits of inclusive education, illustrating that students with disabilities (including LDs) tend to have a higher academic achievement, better graduation rates, and improved long term employment outcomes when learning in general education settings (National Center For Learning Disabilities, 2020). Despite this, students of color, such as LatinX students, are more likely to be placed in more restrictive, segregated classrooms while 55% of White students with disabilities spend at least 80% of their school

day in general education settings (National Center For Learning Disabilities, 2020).

In addition to disparities in identification(diagnosis) and placement, students of color are more likely to experience harsh discipline practices. LatinX students are disciplined much more frequently and severely than their white peers for the same exact behaviors. This is in part due to internalized racial bias among educators. These disparities are especially harmful for students with disabilities who are also among marginalized racial backgrounds. For example, one in four boys and nearly one in five girls from marginalized racial backgrounds (including LatinX) receive an out-of-school suspension (National Center For Learning Disabilities, 2020). Additionally, practices such as shortened school days or being sent home early can also harm students of color with disabilities. Not only are these discipline disparities unfair, but they can have traumatic and lifelong effects on LatinX students with learning disabilities.

When tied together, disparities in diagnosis (identification), placement, & discipline show how the education system can fail to serve LatinX students with LDs. They are frequently misidentified or under-identified due to biases. Addressing these disparities will require a culturally responsive intervention which will revolve around equitable placements, inclusive education, and discipline reform.

Cultural stigma and family/school dynamics

In addition to facing systemic disparities, LatinX students with LDs also have to navigate the psychological burdens of stigma and stereotypes, which can further harm their academic achievement and emotional development. Stigma refers to the devaluation of an attribute based on negative attitudes, stereotypes, or beliefs (Haft et al., 2022). According to Haft et al. (2022), LatinX students with specific learning disabilities (SLDs) experience stigma in the form of negative labeling, lowered expectations from teachers and peers, and internalized beliefs of inadequacy. For example, the use of the term “disability” when referring to individuals with LDs can imply weakness or a lack of intelligence. This stigma can contribute to lower self esteem, increased anxiety, and lower academic motivation.

Not only do LatinX students with LDs face pressure from societal stereotypes regarding their disability but they also receive pressure from their racial and ethnic background. Haft et al. (2022) introduces the term, stigma conscience. “Stigma conscience encompasses an individual’s perception of societal views of their identity, and self-stigma refers to the extent to which individuals internalize those stigmatized views” (Haft et al., 2022). In other words, it’s an individual's awareness of being judged based on their identity. Haft et al. (2022) found that higher stigma conscience among students with SLDs was strongly correlated with low self esteem ($r=-.39$, $p=.002$). This aligns with

research demonstrating that LatinX students with LDs often struggle with feeling “less than” or “not being smart enough even when receiving support services. Haft et al. (2022) also introduces the term, stereotype threat. The definition of the term is similar to stigma but is “a more specific situation in which an individual fears confirming those negative beliefs” (Haft et al., 2022). In other words, it is when an individual is afraid of proving negative stereotypes about their group true, which can negatively impact the academic performance of an individual with an LD.

According to the National Rehabilitation Information Center (NARIC, 2012), similar to many cultures the LatinX community may be ashamed of a family member with a disability or keep them a secret. The perceptions of any type of disability within the LatinX community are shaped by a mix of pride, stigma, and familial obligation. There are many who shame family members with disabilities, avoid seeking help due to cultural norms that emphasize self-reliance and the shared mentality of “what happens in this family, stay with this family”. This mentality can delay and/or prevent LD identification and support for LatinX students with learning disabilities. Additionally, barriers such as language barrier, fear of legal repercussions (many members of the LatinX community are undocumented), and a lack of diverse cultural service providers. Even when LatinX families manage to find support for their students, that support is not culturally tailored or communicated properly. This can lead to a big disconnect between the family support systems and the school systems. As NARIC (2012) mentions, in order to close the divide between the two, we need only policy

change but also intentional bilingual outreach and support. There also needs to be a shift in how schools understand disabilities within cultural contexts of the LatinX community.

OREGON LEGISLATIVE SYSTEM & PROCESS

Before I proceed to discuss policy proposal ideas, it would be beneficial for readers to understand the legislative process in Oregon. Understanding this system is essential for effectively advocating for change, especially when proposing policies that could impact students with learning disabilities, particularly in underrepresented communities like LatinX students. The Oregon Legislative System is bicameral, meaning it has two separate chambers that work together to create and pass laws: the House of Representatives and the Senate. A bill can start in either chamber. After one chamber approves it, the bill moves to the other for review and approval. Both chambers must agree on the final version of a bill before it goes to the Governor for signing.

The house of representatives has 60 representatives, each elected to serve 2-year terms. Each representative serves a specific district, ensuring that local communities have a voice. The House is often where bills are introduced and discussed first, focusing on issues that impact everyday Oregonians. The senate has 30 senators, each elected to serve 4-year terms. Senate districts are larger than House districts, with each senator representing a broader population. The Senate reviews, amends, and votes on bills passed by the House, providing more analysis of bills.

There are two types of sessions: regular and special sessions. Regular sessions are held annually, odd-numbered years (longer session) and

even-numbered years (shorter session). Special sessions are called by the Governor or Legislature for urgent matters. During these sessions, state laws are proposed, debated, and voted on.

My work in the Oregon Community Table of Education & Training has taught me that a large amount of the legislative work is completed in committees. Committees are smaller groups of legislators assigned to specific areas, such as education, health, and more. The proposed policies related to inclusive education for LatinX students with learning disabilities would likely be reviewed by the House and Senate Education Committees. Policy proposals are introduced by individual lawmakers or groups of legislators, and the bills often undergo revisions and discussions before being passed. So once if these proposals are properly edited with more correct verbiage, it would need to be shown to a legislator. If that legislator likes and agrees with the policy proposal, they would become the policy champion and introduce it to the committee.

How An Idea Becomes Law:

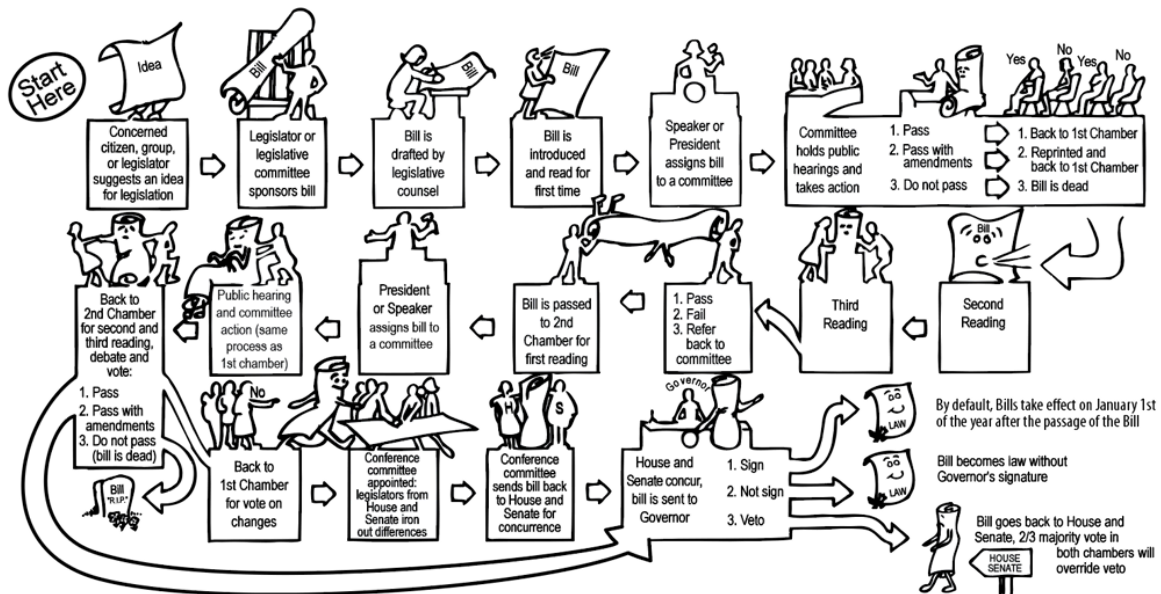


Figure 4

How An Idea Becomes Law Flowchart

Note. Chart illustrating the stages of Oregon's legislative process. From *How an Idea Becomes Law*, by Oregon State Legislature, from https://www.oregonlegislature.gov/citizen_engagement/Pages/How-an-Idea-Becomes-Law.aspx

A citizen or group would need to share an idea for a new law or change with a legislator. The legislator would then sponsor the bill and work with legal counsel to draft the bill. The bill then gets introduced and gets a number. The speaker will send it to a committee for hearings, public input, and possible amendments. After committee approval, the house will vote on the bill. If it passes, the bill will move to the senate where it will undergo a similar process. If the bill does not pass the house or senate, the bill will most likely die. Both chambers must agree on the bill's final version. If both chambers agree and pass the bill, the bill is sent to the governor. The governor must sign or veto the bill. If it is signed, it becomes a law.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The policy proposals presented in this paper are a work in progress, developed by a college student as ideas and suggestions rather than definitive solutions. While every effort has been made to ensure relevance and accuracy, these proposals are not perfect or ready to be presented to a committee. They require further refinement, discussion, and research. These proposals were offered for the purpose of simply opening up a conversation and a starting point for further exploration, not a final recommendation or solution.

POLICY PROPOSAL IDEAS

In order to address the educational inequities faced by LatinX students with learning disabilities, we need to implement a Culturally Responsive Training for Educators. This policy would ensure that teachers have the skills and information necessary to identify and recognize the cultural backgrounds and learning needs of their students. This policy seeks to enhance learning outcomes, reduce biases, and promote a supportive environment for all students—especially those from underrepresented groups.

Culturally Responsive Training for Educators

This proposal proposes a mandatory professional development to help teachers understand and support LatinX students with learning disabilities. This will address the issue of implicit bias, lack of cultural awareness, and

miscommunication between educators and LatinX students with learning disabilities. Many educators are not equipped to recognize or support diverse learning needs, especially in multilingual or multicultural contexts. This can result in misdiagnosis, and insufficient accommodations which can hinder academic progress and success for these students. By implementing culturally responsive training, educators can develop strategies to provide equitable support, fostering a more inclusive and understanding learning environment.

A successful outcome of my policy proposal would be an education system where teachers are equipped to understand and address the unique challenges faced by LatinX students with learning disabilities. This can include increased identification and accurate diagnosis of learning disabilities in LatinX students. As well as improved academic performance and engagement for these students due to tailored support. In order to measure student outcome, we would need to track academic performance, engagement, and retention rates for LatinX students with learning disabilities. For representation and diagnosis, we would need to carefully monitor identification rates of LatinX students in special education programs and support programs to ensure there is neither underrepresentation nor overrepresentation.

I think a realistic timeline for implementing Culturally Responsive Training for Educators would be at least 2 years. I have sorted it into 4 phases: planning, pilot program, full implementation and sustainability. In phase 1: planning, we would secure funding and resources. We would also be developing the training

curriculum on cultural responsiveness and learning disabilities. This would also be a time to partner with experts, advocacy groups, and the community. In phase two: pilot program, which I would expect to take at least six months, is where we would implement the training in select school districts or schools, gather feedback, and make necessary adjustments. In phase 3: full implementation, we would implement the program statewide. In phase 4: sustainability, we would monitor the outcomes of the program annually and refine it based on results.

The entities that will be responsible for implementing this policy would be the State Department of education, school districts and administrators, and education advocacy groups to endure programs that address community needs effectively. Accountability measures should be to require the board of education to track and report annually. I believe it would also help to track student performance and teacher feedback on effectiveness. I also think it would be beneficial to offer incentives for compliance and consequences for non-implementation at the district or school level. The Culturally Responsive Training for Educators would primarily affect existing statutes and programs such as The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) which emphasizes professional development and supports training for teachers to meet the needs of diverse students, including those with disabilities. It would also coincide with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which ensures that teachers are prepared to provide effective education for students with disabilities and could be expanded to include cultural responsiveness in teacher training.

Funding for Inclusive Resources

This proposal requests funding for inclusive resources aimed to secure state or institutional grants to develop materials and programs that cater to the diverse needs of multilingual and culturally diverse learners, particularly LatinX students with learning disabilities. These resources would include bilingual educational materials, culturally relevant curricula, and specialized learning tools that align with the unique needs of these students. By advocating for dedicated funding, this policy ensures that schools are equipped to provide an inclusive educational environment, promoting equal access to learning opportunities and fostering academic success for all students. This policy proposes advocating for dedicated state or federal grants. These funds would specifically support the creation and implementation of resources aimed at students with learning disabilities.

This proposal addresses the lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate resources for LatinX students with learning disabilities. Currently, many schools struggle to provide tailored materials that reflect students' cultural backgrounds and language needs. Without these resources, LatinX students may face barriers in accessing education that fully supports their unique learning requirements. By securing funding to develop bilingual and culturally responsive curricula, this policy aims to bridge these gaps, ensuring that all students, particularly those with learning disabilities, have the tools they need to succeed. A successful outcome of this policy would be the creation and widespread implementation of inclusive

educational resources that cater to the unique cultural and linguistic needs of LatinX students with learning disabilities. This would lead to improved academic performance, higher graduation rates, and better overall educational experiences for these students. Furthermore, it would foster a more equitable education system that actively supports diverse learners by providing them with tools and resources that align with their backgrounds, helping them overcome learning barriers.

Successful implementation can be measured by tracking the number of bilingual and culturally responsive materials created and distributed across schools. We can measure improvements in academic outcomes, such as grades and graduation rates, among LatinX students with learning disabilities. We can collect data on teachers' use of the new resources and their perceptions of how these materials impact student engagement and success. I believe the timeline for implementation should be divided into 4 years. Year 1 would be focused on planning and development. This is where we would need to find key stakeholders such as school districts, non-profits, etc. In year 2, we would develop bilingual and culturally responsive educational material in a select number of school districts and collect feedback from students and teachers. During year 3, we would expand the reach of the resources to more districts. We would analyze the effectiveness of resources using student performance data and feedback from teachers. In the 4th year, this proposal would fully be implemented should the effectiveness and student performance data gathered show that this proposal is working. We would continue monitoring and adapting resources as needed.

In order to effectively implement this policy proposal for developing inclusive resources for LatinX students with learning disabilities in Oregon, a potential stakeholder could include the Oregon Department of Education (ODE). ODE oversees public education and can provide guidance, resources, and potential funding opportunities.

Disability Rights Oregon could also help. DRO is the state's designated protection and advocacy agency for individuals with disabilities, and their role would be essential in ensuring that the needs of students with learning disabilities, particularly LatinX students, are properly addressed. DRO can advocate for the policy at both the state and federal levels, ensuring that students with disabilities have equal access to culturally responsive resources and support. They can also provide legal guidance on the rights of students with disabilities to receive appropriate accommodation and educational services. DRO can help ensure that school districts are complying with state and federal education laws, including those related to students with learning disabilities. DRO's expertise in disability rights would be valuable in ensuring that the materials and programs developed are truly inclusive, not only for multilingual and culturally diverse learners but also for students with specific learning disabilities.

For accountability measures, Oregon Department of Education (ODE) should require school districts to submit regular reports detailing how the funds are being used and the progress of resource implementation. This could include updates on the number of materials distributed, teacher training sessions held, and

student performance improvements. Schools would be required to track and report on student outcomes, including changes in grades, engagement levels, and graduation rates among LatinX students with learning disabilities. A yearly review of the implementation process should be conducted to assess whether the resources are being effectively utilized.

Another accountability measure that should be done is feedback and evaluation from teachers. Teachers and school administrators should provide continuous feedback on the usefulness of the bilingual and culturally responsive materials. This would also be the perfect opportunity to also get feedback on how to adapt and focus on what works better.

This proposal aligns with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of providing equal educational opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities, through the use of inclusive materials and support systems. It also aligns with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. It ensures that educational equity is achieved for LatinX students.

CONCLUSION

LatinX students with learning disabilities continue to face unique and pressing challenges within the U.S education system. Even with laws like IDEA and Section 504 in place, many LatinX students are still being misdiagnosed, underdiagnosed, or completely overlooked. Lack of cultural competence, language, barriers, and a lack of appropriate training for educators all contribute to the education gap in support for Latinx students with LDs. The work doesn't stop at access to education — it also includes ensuring that education is fair, inclusive, and responsive to all of our student's needs.

Throughout this thesis, I used theories such as Critical Race Theory, Cultural Capital Theory, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to help me better understand how systems, schools, and communities affect LatinX students with learning disabilities. These theories allowed me to see that these struggles don't just happen by themselves. These issues are shaped by bigger systems such as racism (intentional or not), language bias, and unequally distributed resources.

My policy proposal ideas — *Culturally Responsive Training for Educators* and *Funding for Inclusive Resources*, are starting points. They are not perfect, nor are they the solution to everything, but I believe that they offer direction for change and progress. True support for LatinX students with learning disabilities

includes purposely making space for their identities, cultures, and experience in educational settings.

On a personal note, this project has been deeply meaningful to me. While this all started with my brother's diagnosis, this quickly came about my own story of so many others I have met along the way. I have witnessed how shame, confusion, frustration, and silence regarding learning disabilities persists in the BIPOC communities, especially the LatinX community. I have heard the frustrations of both parents and students who are exhausted at continuously having to advocate for themselves in a system that was not originally built with them in mind. However, I have also seen what can happen when students do get the support they need and deserve — they thrive.

This thesis is my way of trying to push this conversation forward. We have the numbers and we know the reasons why. LatinX students with learning disabilities deserve better. They need the right tools, policies, and for people to advocate for them, I believe we can make this happen.

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